

Sublime Sappho. *The moon has set & the Pleiades* (in Aeolic Greek, Mycenaean Linear B, Arcado-Cypriot Linear C, English & French)

This article features the first of several exquisite poems by the sublime Sappho (ca. 630-570 BCE?) I shall be translating from the original Aeolic. In her own day and age through to that of classical Athens, and well into Hellenistic Era, Sappho was universally revered by the ancient Greeks as the sublimest of all ancient Greek lyric poets, second only to Homer, who was *de facto* in a league of his own. Indeed, even today, a great many poets and poetry critics, myself included, still consider she bears the crown of ivy wreaths above all other lyric poets, ancient and modern, male or female. Few if any of the greatest lyric poets of any age have been able to match the exquisite harmony and innate music of her exalted lyrics in that most mellifluous of ancient Greek dialects, the Aeolic-Lesbian, which never allows the typical Greek initial aspiration common to so many other ancient Greek dialects to intrude into its resonant tonality.

Considering that practically all of her beautiful are mere fragments (thanks to the insanely destructive proselytism of the early Christians, who destroyed every last poem of hers they could lay their hands on!) it is a miracle that any of her poems survived at all, even in fragments and shreds. Yet, even through the thinnest of fragments, her quintessentially unique sense of rhythm and metre shine so brilliantly in the history of ancient Greek poetry. You are about to be treated to the original version of her fragmentary poem I adore above all others, which I have set not only in the original Aeolic Greek, but in Mycenaean Linear B, Arcado-Cypriot Linear C, and even English and French! Throughout history, to this very day, no one has ever done this. I am thrilled to be able to be the first poet ever to manage carrying this off. It did not come easily. I had to learn not only Mycenaean Linear B but also Arcado-Cypriot Linear C. Not that I wasn't eager to do so. Quite the contrary. I am so in awe Sappho's consummate skill and artistry that I will do anything to broadcast her name and her sublime poetry to the whole world in any languages I can. I have yet to master writing modern Greek, but I shall eventually be able to overcome that small hurdle as well.



*Sappho ou la poésie lyrique*, par Alphonse Osbert ( 1857-1939 )

And what is the poem I speak of? Behold and marvel!  
*Quelle merveille de la poésie antique la plus intime !*

*on the next page / à la prochaine page*

δέδουκα μὲν ἃ σελάννα  
καὶ Πληΐαδες· μέσαι δὲ  
νύκτες, παρὰ ἔρχετ' ὥρα,  
ἔγω δὲ μόνα κατεύδω·

Σαπφώ

*Mycenaean Linear B*



*Arcado-Cypriot Linear C*



deduka men a selanna  
kai Pleiades. mesai de  
nuktes, para erchet' ora,  
ego de mona kateudo.

Sappho

deduka me a serana  
Pereiadewe qe mesai de  
nukete para eqete ora  
eko de mona kateudo

*English*

The moon has set,  
and along with it the Pleiades; it is midnight,  
so time has passed me by,  
and I lie down to sleep alone.

*français*

*La lune se couche enfin,  
et les Pléiades ; c'est minuit  
et les heures s'envolent sans moi  
et moi, je me couche toute seule.*

This particular poem is my absolute favourite of all of Sappho's brilliant lyrics, however fragmentary. It flows so naturally in Aeolic Greek that it washes over me, emotionally and spiritually. Like the Renaissance language, Italian, Aeolic Greek is superbly suited for lyric poetry, as it has no aspirates. Aspiration can and sometimes does sound harsh in lyric poetry. Aeolic Greek, fortuitously lacking aspiration, is notable for its sublime melody. Even if you could not even read Aeolic Greek, if you could only hear this stunning poem, the Harmony of the Spheres would wash you out to the Aegean sea on a pliant raft. There have indeed been recordings made of many of Sappho's fragments and of her legendary Hymn to Aphrodite. You can really treat yourself by listening to the music of this awe-inspiring Hymn in the original Aeolic here:

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<b>Sappho:</b>	Ode to Aphrodite
<b>Alcaeus:</b>	Winter
<b>Mimnermos:</b>	Short-lived is treasured youth
<b>Homer:</b>	Odyssey - Calypso and Ulysses
<b>Hesiod:</b>	Rough is the road to happiness
<b>Bacchylides:</b>	Great gifts, peace brings to mortals
<b>Solon:</b>	Eunomia

[http://homoecumenicus.com/ioannidis\\_music\\_ancient\\_greeks.htm](http://homoecumenicus.com/ioannidis_music_ancient_greeks.htm)

*Sappho: Ode to Aphrodite*  
*Audio, original Greek text and English translation*  
*An Approach to the Original Singing of ancient Greek lyrical poetry*  
by Ioannidis Nikolaos

*Ioannidis N. is a composer, musicologist, multi-instrumentalist performer, media theorist, and digital media creative producer (with formal qualifications in Music, Musicology, Media Studies, and Digital Media Studies), who is researching ancient Greek music and its relationship with all musical cultures that have been subject to the classical Greek.*

It is highly advisable to read Ioannidis Nikolaos' explanatory text introducing the phenomenon of ancient Greek lyrical poetry as a musical medium, or as he himself unequivocally states, "in my view, the music of ancient Greeks can not be studied separately from their literature, poetry, drama, religion, and even their social and political life." These recordings have all endeavoured to preserve what at least some researchers consider to have been just about the right pronunciation and intonation innate to ancient Aeolic Greek. Of course, her poems, as practically all ancient Greek lyrical poems, were always sung to the accompaniment of the lyre, pan pipes or similar instruments.

Or if you like, you can read it here in the original Aeolic:

Ποικιλόθρον', ἀθάνατ' Ἀφρόδιτα,  
παῖ Δίος, δολόπλοκε, λίσσομαί σε  
μή μ' ἄσαισι μήτ' ὀνίαισι δάμνα,  
πότνια, θῦμον·

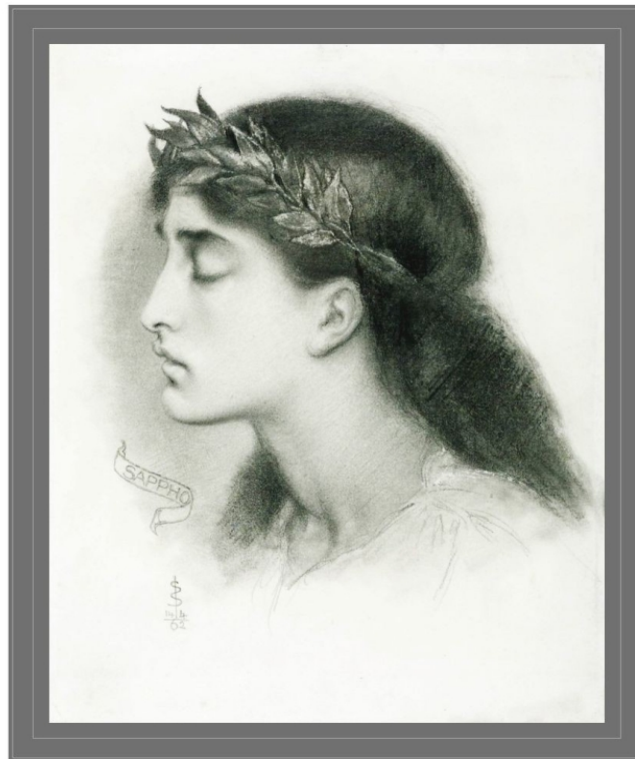
ἀλλὰ τυῖδ' ἔλθ', αἵποτα κατέρωτα  
τᾶς ἔμας αὖδως αἴϊοισα πῆλυι  
ἔκλυες, πάτρος δὲ δόμον λίποισα  
χρῦσιον ἦλθες

κ.τ.λ. ff.

<http://www.classicpersuasion.org/pw/sappho/sape01u.htm>

★

For a fine translation into English by *The Poems of Sappho*, by John Myers O'Hara, [1910], see:  
<http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/pos/pos08.htm>



Simeon Solomon (Pre-Raphaelite) 1840-1905, *A Study of Sappho*, 1862



To be perfectly honest, I have never read any lyric poet in any language (English, French, Spanish, Italian, German or Russian) who has ever been able to rival her consummate artistry. I adore her.

A few linguistic notes:

Being an East Greek dialect, Aeolic Greek is related to both the Mycenaean & Arcado-Cypriot dialects. There are many striking similarities and yet some notable differences in these three dialects.

Mycenaean Greek in Linear B:

Mycenaean Greek has no **L** series of syllabograms. The **R** series must be substituted, hence “*serana*” for Aeolic “*selanna*”. Since Linear B is an open syllabary, in which all syllabograms must end with a vowel, it is impossible to spell any word with two consecutive consonants, hence the last syllable of “*serana*” has only 1 **N**. For the same reason, final consonants, which are *normative* in almost all ancient Greek dialects, must be omitted in Mycenaean Greek. Hence, we have “*me*” for “*men*”. It is difficult to express the plural in Mycenaean Greek. However, there are precedents. The plural of “*apore*” (amphora) is construed by some translators (including myself) as “*aporewe*”. This has given me the leeway to write the Pleiades as “*Periadewe*”.

Arcado-Cypriot Linear C:

Similar bizarre (often parallel) spelling conventions plague Arcado-Cypriot Linear C. Unlike Linear B, which has a dental **D** series of syllabograms, Linear C lacks it, and must substitute the dental **T** series. On the other hand, Linear C has both an **L** and an **R** series, and so both liquids can be accounted for. Since documents in *alphabetic* Arcado-Cypriot *must express the final consonant*, in line with the standard convention for other East Greek dialects, Linear C has no choice but to resort to the *opposite strategy* from Mycenaean Linear B for the orthography of the *ultimate*, when it is meant to express the dative singular, the nominative plural or for all other Greek words ending with a consonant. The consonant *must* be expressed in Linear C, since it is always written in the alphabet. This is absolutely *de rigueur*, since many documents were *simultaneously composed in Linear C and in the Arcado-Cypriot alphabet*. In order to achieve this, Linear C has no choice but to use syllabograms, which none-the-less still inconveniently end in a *vowel*. It neatly skirts this annoying problem by expressing the ultimate consonant, following it with a *filler vowel*. A weird solution, but it works. If it works, it works. If a wheel is not broken, there is no point fixing it. Who would even bother, especially any scribe writing in Arcado-Cypriot Linear C? The whole notion is irrelevant, nothing but a red herring.

Hence, in the Linear C version, we have “*mene*” for “*men*”, which is the opposite of “*me*” for “*men*” in Linear B. Likewise, the *plural is always clearly expressed*, as in “*peleite*”, where Linear C must also insert a *final filler vowel*, in most cases **SE** (to express the consonantal plural in *sigma*), as well as **NE** for all nouns ending in the consonant **N**. Such nouns are extremely common in ancient Greek dialects. Notice also the “*te*” in “*peleite*”, since Linear C has no **D** series of syllabograms.

On the other hand, both Mycenaean Linear B & Arcado-Cypriot, having no **G** series of syllabograms, are obliged to skirt that thorny little problem with pretty much the same strategy. Mycenaean Linear B must substitute either the **K** or the **Q** series. Arcado-Cypriot has no guttural **Q** series either, so all words with **G** + vowel must be expressed by **K** + vowel, hence “*eko*” for “*ego*” in both Linear B & C. I can hear you who read ancient Greek well or who are ancient Greek linguistics loudly protest that there were no personal pronouns in either Linear B or Linear C. And you are right. However, I had to take liberties with the Aeolic Greek, because it does use personal pronouns, and frequently. As for the likelihood that Mycenaean Greek would have used the **Q** series of syllabograms to express words with guttural **G** + vowel, I readily grant that this may have been true, except for one critical consideration. Mycenaean &

Arcado-Cypriot were the closest ancient Greek dialects by far, being kissing cousins. So if Arcado-Cypriot expresses **G** + vowel with the guttural **K** series of syllabograms, it stands to reason that it is more likely than not that Mycenaean Greek must have done the same thing. But there is no guarantee of this. Still, the **Q** series of syllabograms would have fit the bill just as well.

And there you have it.

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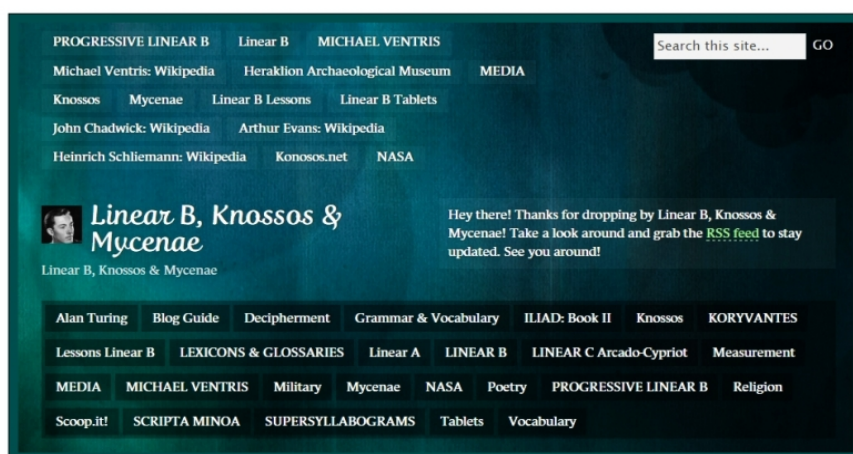
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